

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

March/April 1988

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The Ultimate Contradiction

Two people were walking along a stony road long ago. They were deep in conversation about everything that had happened. Things could not have been worse, it seemed, and I suppose the road was longer and dustier and stonier than it had ever been to them, though they had traveled it many times. As they trudged along, trying to make sense out of the scuttling of their hopes, a stranger joined them and wanted to know what they were talking about.

"You must be the only stranger in Jerusalem who hasn't heard all the things that have happened there recently!" said one of the two, whose name was Cleopas.

It seemed that the stranger had no idea what things he referred to, so Cleopas explained that there was a man from the village of Nazareth, Jesus by name, who was clearly a prophet, but He had been executed by crucifixion a few days before.

"We were hoping He was the one who was to come and set Israel free."

Things had been bad for Israel for a long time, and those who understood the ancient writings looked for a liberator and a savior. Cleopas and his companion had pinned their hopes on this Nazarene—surely He was the one God had sent, a prophet "strong in what he did and what he said" (Luke 24:19 JBP). But those hopes had been completely crushed. He had been killed and even His body could not be found. Where were they to turn now?

The story goes on to tell how the stranger explained to them that they had not really understood what the prophets had written, and that this death which had so shattered their

faith was inevitable if the Messiah was to "find his glory."

But what a strange phrase—"find his glory." What could it mean? I can imagine the two looking at each other in bewilderment. This shameful death—in order to find his *glory*?

When they reached their destination the stranger was about to go further but they persuaded him to stay with them. As they sat down to eat he picked up the loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. Suddenly they recognized him. *Jesus!* The two who sat with Him had not been pessimists. They had indeed had hopes. But what puny hopes theirs had been. In their wildest optimism they could not have dreamed of the glory they now saw. A resurrection, the ultimate contradiction to all of the world's woes, had taken place. They saw Jesus with their own eyes. What must their own words have seemed to them if they thought about what they had said: "We were hoping . . ."? They could not deny that those hopes had died, but what insane dreamer could have imagined the possibility that had become a reality here at their own supper table? Their savior had come back. He had walked with them. He was in their house. He was eating the very bread they had provided.

If resurrection is a fact—and there would be no Easter if it were not—then there is no situation so hopeless, no horizon so black, that God cannot there "find His glory." The truth is that without those ruined hopes, without that death, without the suffering that He called inevitable, the glory itself would be impossible. Why the universe is so arranged we must leave to the One who arranged it, but that it is so we are bound to believe.

And when we find ourselves most hopeless, the road most taxing, we may also find that it is then that the Risen Christ catches up to us on the way, better than our dreams, beyond all our

hopes. For it is He—not His gifts, not His power, not what He can do for us, but He Himself—who comes and makes Himself known to us. And this is the one pure joy for those who sorrow.

And yet . . . and yet we sorrow. The glorious fact of the resurrection is the very heart of our faith. We believe it. We bank all our hopes on it. And yet we sorrow. It is still appointed unto man once to die, and those who are left must grieve—not as those without hope, for the beloved will be resurrected. The “ultimate contradiction,” however, seems very far in the future. There is no incongruity in the human tears and the pure joy of the presence of Christ, for He wept human tears too.

When we learned recently from dear friends that they had lost their baby, this is what I wrote to them (I’ve been asked to print it here for others who are bereaved):

“Your little note was waiting for us when we returned yesterday from Canada. How our hearts went running to you, weeping with you, wishing we could see your faces and tell you our sympathies. Yet it is ‘no strange thing’ that has happened to you, as Peter said in his epistle (1 Peter 4:12)—it gives you a share in Christ’s suffering. To me this is one of the deepest but most comforting of all the mysteries of suffering. Not only does He enter into grief in the fullest understanding, suffer with us and for us, but in the very depths of sorrow He allows us, in His mercy, to enter into *His*, gives us a share, permits us the high privilege of ‘filling up’ that which is lacking (Colossians 1:24) in His own. He makes, in other words, something redemptive out of our broken hearts if those hearts are offered up to Him. We are told that He will never despise a broken heart. It is an acceptable sacrifice when offered wholly to Him for His transfiguration. Oh, there is so *much* for us to learn here, but it will not be learned in a day or a week. Level after level must be plumbed as we walk with the Shepherd, and He will do His purifying, purging, forging, shaping work in us, that we may be shaped to the image of Christ Himself. Such shaping takes a hammer, a chisel, and a file—painful tools, a painful process.

“Your dear tiny Laura is in the Shepherd’s arms. She will never have to suffer. She knew only the heaven of the womb (the safest place in

all the world—apart from the practice of abortion) and now she knows the perfect heaven of God’s presence. I’m sure that your prayer for both your children has been that God would fulfill His purpose in them. It is the highest and best we can ask for our beloved children. He has already answered that prayer for Laura.

“Do you know the Letters of Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661)? He wrote so beautifully to mothers who had lost children. Here is one: ‘Grace rooteth not out the affections of a mother, but putteth them on His wheel who maketh all things new, that they may be refined; therefore sorrow for a dead child is allowed to you, though by measure and ounceweights; the redeemed of the Lord have not a dominion or lordship over their sorrow and other affections, to lavish out Christ’s goods at their pleasure. . . . He commandeth you to weep; and that princely One took up to heaven with Him a man’s heart to be a compassionate High Priest. The cup ye drink was at the lip of sweet Jesus, and He drank of it. . . . Ye are not to think it a bad bargain for your beloved daughter that she died—she hath gold for copper and brass, eternity for time. All the knot must be that she died too soon, too young, in the morning of her life; but sovereignty must silence your thoughts. I was in your condition: I had but two children, and both are dead since I came hither. The supreme and absolute Former of all things giveth not an account of any of His matters. The good Husbandman may pluck His roses and gather His lilies at midsummer, and, for ought I dare say, in the beginning of the first summer month; and he may transplant young trees out of the lower ground to the higher, where they may have more of the sun and a more free air, at any season of the year. The goods are His own. The Creator of time and winds did a merciful injury (if I may borrow the word) to nature in landing the passenger so early.’

“Jesus learned obedience by the things which He *suffered*, not by the things which He enjoyed. In order to fit you both for His purposes

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both here and in eternity, He has lent you this sorrow. But He bears the heavier end of the Cross laid upon you! Be sure that Lars and I are praying for you, dear friends."

The Little Red Notebook

Several readers wanted more from the little red notebook I found among my mother's things when she died last year. Someone wanted prayers for grandchildren. Here is one from Mother's notebook:

Holy Father, in Thy mercy, hear our
anxious prayer;
Keep our loved ones, now far distant,
'neath Thy care.

Jesus, Savior, let Thy presence be their
light and guide;
Keep, O keep them, in their weakness,
at Thy side.

When in sorrow, when in danger, when
in loneliness,
In Thy love look down and comfort
their distress.

May the joy of Thy salvation be their
strength and stay;
May they love and may they praise Thee
day by day.

Holy Spirit, let Thy teaching sanctify
their life;
Send Thy grace that they may conquer
in the strife.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God the One
in Three,
Bless them, guide them, save them,
keep them near to Thee.
(I.S. Stevenson, 1869)

If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently and replace it tenderly in its Master's presence. And even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back and place it again in our Lord's presence, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour will be very well employed.

St. Francis de Sales

Killing in Zimbabwe

When sixteen white missionaries and children were hacked to death by Marxist-Leninist rebels in Zimbabwe last November, the world took little notice. The Evangelical Press Association called me, asking for my comments as to why this might be, in view of the worldwide, detailed coverage given thirty-two years ago to the death of my husband Jim and four other Americans speared by Auca Indians. I don't know, but my guess was that television (which had been in its infancy in 1956) has deprived us of our ability—even of our "right"—to be shocked. You can't be shocked ten times a day every day.

News from Jim's brother, a missionary in Peru, sounds ominously like what's happening in Zimbabwe. There is pillage and murder in remote jungle towns by Marxists who, like those in Zimbabwe, would be glad to "rid the country of Western, capitalist-oriented people." A letter from my brother-in-law and his wife cites 2 Chronicles 14:11, and asks us to pray, not for their personal safety, but "that we may be small enough, weak enough, and humble enough that the Lord may show Himself strong on our behalf."

Will you pray for them and for all who are in a similar position?

News of Valerie

In response to my question in the September/October Newsletter about what you'd like more of, a number asked for news of my daughter Valerie. Last July I went to Laurel, Mississippi, and helped them sort and pack and have a gigantic garage sale. Then they loaded their five children (now ages 10, 8, 6, 3, and 1) into the van and drove to El Toro, California. Walt is pastor of the Aliso Creek Presbyterian Church in Laguna Niguel. The two oldest children whom Val has been schooling at home now attend a Lutheran school. Both received Outstanding Student awards, which made Val and Walt happy and humbly grateful, especially since Val was not convinced she had done a thorough job of educating them. I applaud homeschoolers. Having seen the deleterious effects of early peer-group pressures on little children, and the salu-

tary effects of Indian children's never being separated from parents until they are at least ten or twelve (and Valerie's having been continuously with me until she was in fourth grade), I recommend it. It's hard work. It takes sacrifice. It's worth it.

March—September 1988

March 2

South Hamilton, MA; Fairhaven Christian School.

March 5

Trenton, MI; St. Paul Mini-Retreat, St. Paul Lutheran Church, (313) 676-1565.

March 11-13

Birmingham, AL; Briarwood Presbyterian Church single women, Marnie Birdsong, 967-1760

March 14, 15

Columbus, GA; women's conference, Jeannie Illges, (404) 324-2647.

March 20

Portland, ME; Payson Park Evangelical Free Church.

April 8, 9

LaCrosse, WI; Whole Women Breakaway, Darlene Dixon, 416 McHugh Street, Holmen, WI.

April 16

Quincy, IL; Lighthouse Ministries, Debbie Niederhauser, (217) 228-1731.

April 27

Byfield, MA; Byfield Parish Church, (617) 352-2022.

April 30

Chicago, IL; Moody Bible Institute, Mrs. Jo McCarthy, (312) 329-4402.

May 1-15

Speaking engagement in Australia.

June 4-5

Camden, ME; The Rev. David Edman, St. Thomas' Church.

July 15-17

Lebanon, OR; Camp Tadmor, Carla Stenberg, (503) 657-4105.

July 18, 19

Cody, WY; Missionary Alliance Church, The Rev. James N. Howard, (307) 587-3418.

September 2-3

Montreal, Quebec; Seminaire Baptiste Evangelique, (514) 337-2555.

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